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Quality of Life in rural areas**

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Capturing impacts of Leader and of measures to improve Quality of Life in rural areas

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Abstract

The Helpdesk of European Evaluation Network for Rural Development supported by a group of external experts has prepared a Working Paper on "Capturing the impacts of Leader and measures to improve the Quality of life (QoL) in rural areas". The working paper provides methodological support for evaluators, managing authorities and other interested parties.

The main evaluation challenges include: assessing the "double scope" of Leader (it is both a process and generates impacts); the need to adequately define what is QoL in the context of Rural Development Programmes (RDPs); tackling the qualitative nature of the effects; identifying contributions from small-scale interventions; and the fact that the EU's Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) requires assessment of impacts ultimately at programme level.

*The working paper is targeted primarily at practitioners involved in the evaluation of the current RDPs (2007-2013). It proposes a **framework of reference** which provides a conceptual model in order to assess Quality of Life around four dimensions – environment, socio-culture, economy and governance.*

The full Working Paper can be found on the website of the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development: <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation>.

Keywords: Rural development, impact evaluation, leader, quality of life

Topic: 1 The methodology of agricultural and rural policy evaluation

JEL classification: Enter JEL codes. Q18 Agriculture Policy and Food Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Council Regulation 1698/2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) sets the legal framework for the preparation and implementation of Rural Development Programmes for 2007-2013. The preamble to the regulation identifies the need to *carry out investments making rural areas more attractive* in order to reverse trends towards economic and social decline and depopulation of the countryside and to *enhance the human potential in this respect*. EAFRD support should also be granted for *"other measures relating to the broader rural economy...having regard to the multi-sectoral needs for endogenous rural development and that measures relating to the broader rural economy should be preferably implemented through local development strategies"* supported via the Leader Axis of the Rural Development Programs.

In spite of the increased interest to broaden rural policy interventions still the measuring of the impact of Quality of Life and Leader Axis measures has presented enduring challenges to evaluators throughout the previous three generations of Rural Development Programmes. Additionally, measuring aspects as intangible as Quality of Life tends to be an inexact science,

particularly when undertaken over relatively short time horizons. It is not only a challenge for evaluation in terms of attribution of intervention effects but also in arriving at a common definition of what Quality of Life is, what represents improvement and what methodologies are most appropriate for capturing change.

The need for support to assess the impacts of Leader and Quality of Life measures was recognised in the design of the Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF), agreed by Member States. The establishment of a Thematic Working Group by the European Evaluation Network for Rural Development (hereafter Evaluation Expert Network) in 2009 has been an important step to prepare for the Mid Term Evaluations of the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programmes (RDPs). The final product of this Thematic Working Group – the Working Paper on "Capturing the impacts of Leader and measures to improve the Quality of life (QoL) in rural areas" is targeted primarily at practitioners and proposes practical methodological approaches and tools for capturing the impact of the Leader approach and of the measures aimed to improve the Quality of Life in rural areas. It is based on state-of-the-art methodologies and current practice in Member States.

2. MEASURING IMPACTS OF LEADER AND QUALITY OF LIFE MEASURES WITHIN THE RDPs

2.1. Research focus

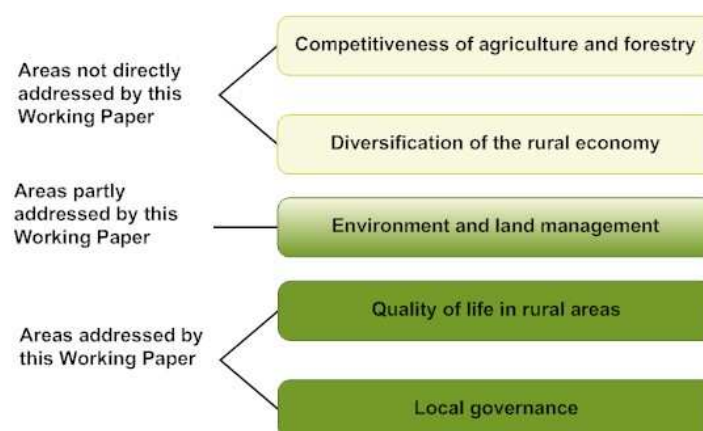
The starting point for assessing the impacts of measures of Leader and Quality of Life is the definition of a clear set of overall objectives of the EU rural development policy towards which all measures and actions should contribute:

- improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector;
- improving the environment and the countryside;
- encouraging diversification of the rural economy and
- improving the quality of life in rural areas.¹
-

This Working Paper focuses on the above mentioned objectives to various degrees as shown in the following diagram:

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm

Figure 1. Scope of the Working Paper in terms of RD policy objectives



Source: Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network

As seen from the diagram, the objectives related to the Axes 3 and 4 – the Quality of Life and Local Governance are addressed to a high degree by this Working paper, based on the assumption that improved local governance supported under Leader actions stays not on its own but significantly contributes to improving the Quality of Life.

Overall requirements for the assessment of impacts of rural development interventions are defined by the EC regulations, the CMEF and its Handbook, describing only in brief specificities related to measures of Leader and Quality of Life axes of RDPs. The Handbook, Guidance Note E defines a hierarchy of objectives and indicators, completed by common evaluation questions, which together represent the respective intervention logic of individual measures. Axis 3 measure fiche contains a specific evaluation question regarding the extent of the contribution of the measure, support, supported investments, activities or services provided to improving the Quality of Life in rural areas and these are qualitative in nature. For Leader, six of the eight evaluation questions identified in the Handbook on CMEF, Guidance note B, relate solely to qualitative assessment of the effects of the Leader approach. The other two evaluation questions relate to the extent to which *the Leader approach has contributed to the priorities of Axes 1, 2 and 3 and to the extent have cooperation projects and/or transfer of best practices based on the Leader approach contributed to a better achievement of the objectives of one or more of the other three Axes.*²

In order to suggest a common approach and framework for assessing the impact of QoL and Leader measures it is necessary to clarify the concepts and implications of Quality of Life and the Leader interventions within the scope of wider objectives assigned to axes 3 and 4, via defining a series of impact categories and linking them into the common evaluation framework.

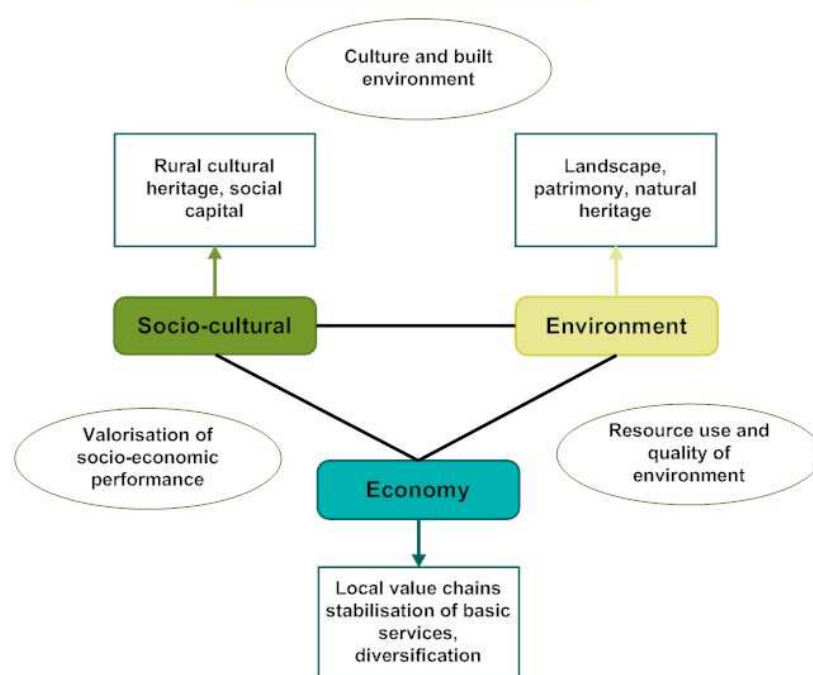
² Handbook on CMEF – Guidance note B: Evaluation Guidelines; DG Agriculture and Rural Development (2006)

2.2. The Quality of Life in the context of Axis 3 of Rural Development Programmes

In the context of Rural Development Programs, Quality of Life must be understood as a multi-dimensional concept, comprising several aspects, such as a diversified rural economy, the provision of services and basic living conditions, social networks and associations as well as the cultural environment that makes life enjoyable and satisfying. The composition and content of Rural Development measures applied in Member States indicates which logical framework (objective levels vis-à-vis outputs, results, impacts) forms the basis for identifying Quality of Life indicators in Axes 3 and 4.

This implies that Quality of Life can be considered in the following **dimensions** as shown below.

Figure 2. Dimensions of Quality of Life in rural areas



Source: Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network

The **socio-cultural and services dimension** of Quality of Life underlines the importance of social and cultural capital/heritage. This includes both soft factors such as community life, traditions, social infrastructure and cohesion, and material or hard factors, e.g. buildings or other infrastructures in the context of village renewal, facilitating basic services for cultural and leisure activities and for the rural population in general.

The **environmental dimension** of Quality of Life encompasses the human well-being arising due to the conservation and upgrading of the environment, taking into account the

impact that the evolution of the environment can have on the activities of the population and global well-being in the area.

The **economic dimension** of Quality of Life implies an adequacy and security of income, providing rural households with new economic opportunities such as on and off farm diversification, *tourism, crafts and the development of micro-businesses in the broader rural economy*.³

2.3. *Leader in relation to Quality of Life*

Governance in its various forms is a highly important theme when evaluating the impacts of Leader measures. According to the CMEF documents the Leader approach should contribute to improve governance in rural areas. In several policy documents (EC, CoE, OECD and UNDP) the topic of good governance has been discussed⁴ and associated with the following aspects:

- transparency
- participation
- horizontal and vertical integration
- legitimacy
- subsidiarity
- high quality of communication and conflict management
- high quality of learning mechanisms.

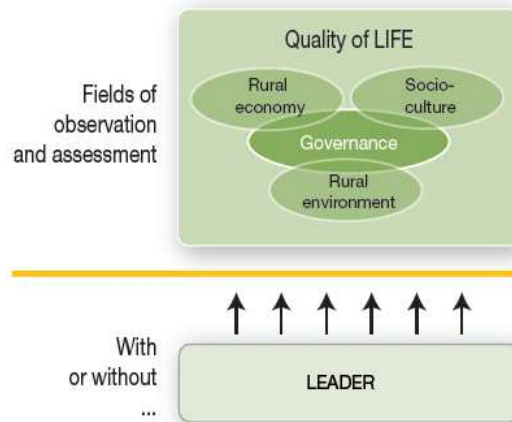
Good governance is not only important for the successful implementation of Leader projects, but it also contributes to improving the Quality of Life and therefore can be considered as an additional fourth dimension of Quality of Life.

The figure 3 below provides a visual representation of the inter-relationship between the four dimensions of Quality of Life and Leader.

³ Council Decision 2006/144/EC pertaining to Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013)

⁴ See: (i) European Commission (2001): *European Governance. A white paper*.; (ii) Directorate of Democratic Institutions. (2008). *The Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance at Local Level*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg' (iii) OECD (2006). *The new rural paradigm: policies and governance*. OECD Rural Policy Reviews. Paris; (iv) UNDP (2004): *Governance for sustainable human development*. A UNDP policy document.

Figure 3. Leader in relation to Quality of Life



Source: Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network

2.4. Expected impacts on the four dimensions of Quality of life

2.4.1 Expected impacts on social and cultural capital and services

The concepts of social and cultural capital are brought into evaluation as possible and potentially applicable categories to discuss the non-tangible impacts of Axes 3 and 4 measures which may foster them and make progress along these dimensions for example in the following ways:

► Social Capital

- Reinforcement of regional identity and coherence: **Relevant aspects of impacts in this regard** could be **increased interaction**, the corporate sense of actors involved, the extent or growth of solidarity between different local or regional interest groups and the density of communication structures in regions. At a wider level, the utilization of local specificities and the valorisation of area-specific characteristics can arise as a result of rural development activities. The **awareness and strengthening of identity and image characteristics** or special competences can enhance an area's popularity.
- Involvement, networking and openness: the extent and intensity of "involvement" in information-, participation- and co-operation-structures can be considered as a result or stronger social relationships.

► Cultural capital

- Enhancement of cultural rural amenities: The expected impacts often include the improvement of housing and living circumstances in villages, **energising and revitalising** them through the **stimulation** of businesses and residential use as well as the recreational and leisure offers.
- Valorisation of cultural assets: Different impact categories concern the enhancing of touristic, natural and cultural activities by utilising the local

heritage and the **valorisation of cultural assets** accompanied by an increasing **attractiveness** of rural areas for recreation, living and cultural activities.

2.4.2 Expected impacts on the rural environment

The main expected impact is to enhance the well-being of the population due to the improved environmental situation. This includes two main aspects:

- Improved ecosystem services and environmental amenities: may have a direct impact on human well-being through the direct provision of goods or through the direct results of regulatory ecosystem services and supporting ecosystem services. Besides this services such as the beauty of the landscape, the overall image of the territory, the spiritual and inspirational values, shall be considered as well.
- Enhanced and improved involvement of the rural population in environmental management can lead to increased awareness, responsibility (local and regional) and identification with their own region, its natural resources and environmental qualities as important contribution to Quality of Life.

2.4.3 Expected impacts on the rural economy

There are five types of Axis 3 measures: those relating to diversification and business development, including tourism; those relating to more effective service provision, including village renewal; those relating to the upgrading of rural heritage; and those relating to training and human capital development.

- Work-life balance and job environment: This includes additional local employment opportunities for farm households outside the agricultural sector, improvement of working conditions for rural population as well as job satisfaction.
- Access to basic services and access to infrastructure and services: this includes the creation/enhancement as well as accessibility and attainability of basic services for the economy and rural population, including services offered by small or newly established enterprises or diversifying farms, which is contributing to the upgrading of rural attractiveness.
- To enhance the human capital: includes capacities for local actors required for the diversification of the local economy and provision of local services.
- Utilization of entrepreneurial and human potential: including broad diversification of economic activities, to stimulation of small enterprises and promoting employment.
- Valorisation of socio-economic performance: including the increase of economic activities linked to resources and potentials specific to the area.

2.4.4 Expected impacts on governance

The main impact of Quality of Life measures and Leader on governance can be summarized at two levels:

► **Multi-level governance:**

- Level of decentralisation, assessing its 'dynamic' and innovative contributions to improved regional rural policies and empowerment of local actors (*vertical integration and subsidiarity*)
- Coordination between different levels of governance, referring to any coordination networks or joint actions that have been developed or supported by the vertical level (*vertical integration and co-operation*).

► **Local governance:**

- Partnership composition and empowerment of local actors, assessing commitments of partners inside of Local Action Groups (LAG) and their support of the local development also beyond the programming period. (*participation, horizontal integration, legitimacy and high quality of learning mechanisms*).
- Quality of governance, assessing transparency and common trust among participating local actors (*transparency and high quality of communication and conflict management*).

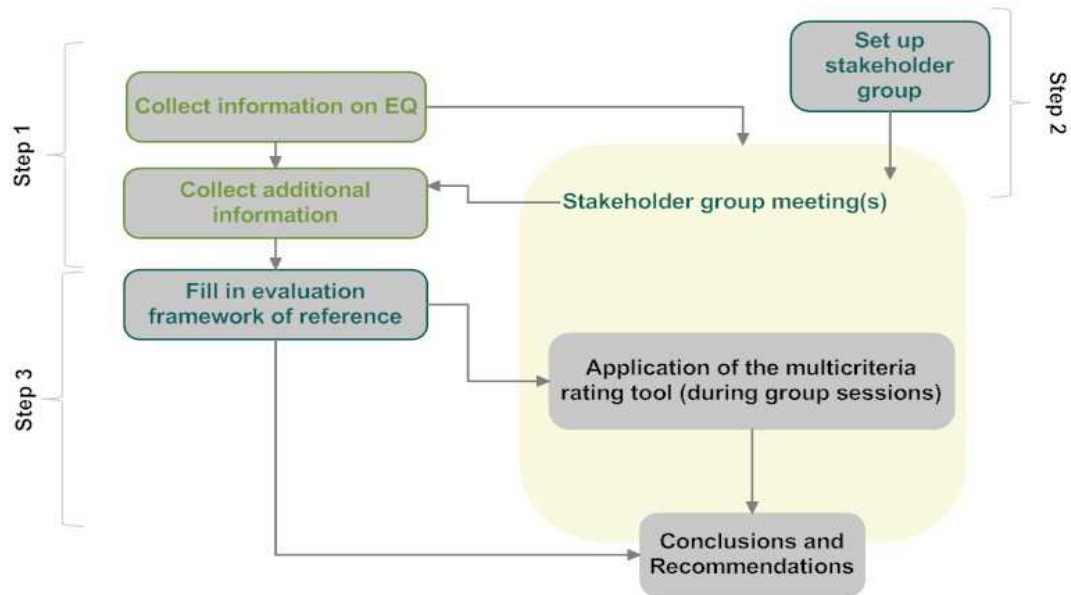
2.5. Overall methodological approach

In the context of standard programme evaluations capturing the impact of Leader and Axis 3 measures on Quality of Life remains difficult and has certain limitations: in particular, the time horizon of a programming period is quite short in terms of determining the extent to which Quality of Life has been enhanced in a deep and sustainable sense. Impacts in areas such as provision of services, enhanced employment, etc. that can usually be positive, should be largely measured by quantitative data (baseline, monitoring and reporting), which is often not the case, since the diffuse and diverse nature of the data, problem with their generation and the variations in existing monitoring and reporting systems. However, less tangible aspects of Quality of Life and Leader Axes measures require more qualitative assessment as part of the evaluation process accompanied by qualitative evaluation methods.

Against this background, our Working Paper suggests a 3-step methodological approach for capturing impacts of Leader and Quality of Life measures. The approach considers the **etic** perspective based on outside actors – evaluators, applying their external judgement and assessment and the **emic** perspective based on insiders' internal perceptions and judgements – local communities in Leader areas, or communities where Quality of Life measures have been implemented, the same time applying participative evaluation approaches engaging beneficiaries in the process.

The suggested overall methodological frame is based on a 3 step-approach which is closely interlinked with the CMEF indicators and evaluation questions.

Figure 4. The three step process to evaluate impact of Quality of Life measures and Leader



Source: Helpdesk of the Evaluation Expert Network

1. **Step 1. Adapt and complete a framework of reference:** This means that based on the monitoring data reported against the CMEF indicators several tables of assessment criteria and indicators should be adapted according to the specificities of the programme in order to gather and structure the available information. These tables relate each impact category to the relevant evaluation questions, judgment criteria and the suggested impact indicators. The exercise of filling in these tables will help to prepare for the next steps.
2. **Step 2. Organise a series of focus group meetings** (round tables) with a selected panel of stakeholders at programme level (Managing Authorities, Local Action Group executives, private stakeholders, main beneficiaries of measures etc). During these meetings the various assessment criteria will be discussed and complementary qualitative information will be collected.
3. **Step 3. Use a multi-criteria ranking tool:** During this final step, the above mentioned stakeholders or focus group members are asked to provide their judgment for each assessment criterion. These will be consolidated by the group and reflect progress in terms of the baseline situation (presented in the RDP document or where necessary reconstructed in parts by retrospective assessment). In order to facilitate this step one suggestion is to use a multi-criteria ranking tool.

2.6. Framework of reference – Example of linking common and specific evaluation questions with criteria and indicators

In order to further operationalise the various impact categories, a **framework of reference** has been developed in the form of tables separately for each category, which relate to appropriate CMEF evaluation questions and contain judgement criteria, specific evaluation questions and indicators. . It can be used by the evaluators in the overall methodological approach to guide the structuring, observation and analysis phases of the evaluation.

Examples of common evaluation Questions, assessment criteria, specific evaluation questions and indicators of reference frameworks for each of four impact categories are presented below⁵:

A. Socio-cultural impacts on Quality of life

- *The related CMEF common evaluation question:* “To what extent has the Leader approach contributed to mobilising the endogenous development potential of rural areas?”
- *The assessment criterion proposed by the framework of reference:* “Local identity and coherence strengthened”
- *Specific evaluation questions proposed by the framework of reference:* 1) “To what extent have the RDP measures increased the interaction amongst actors to promote a sense of place and to strengthen community ties?” and 2) “To what extent have co-operation and networking increased the economic performance of the area?”
- *Impact indicators suggested by the framework of reference:* 1) “Number of people participating in collective investments and composition of participants in projects of this type.” And 2) “Relative number and volume of business/employment arising from co-operation and networking relationships”

B. Rural environment impacts on Quality of Life.

- *The related CMEF common evaluation question:* “To what extent has the measure contributed to the sustainable management and development of Natura 2000 sites or other places of High Nature Value and to environmental awareness of rural population?”
- *The assessment criterion proposed by the framework of reference:* “Improved environmental services and amenities and their perception”
- *Specific evaluation questions proposed by the framework of reference:* 1) “To what extent have QoL measures and Leader generated new services or

⁵ The full reference framework for each impact category can be found in the Working Paper of the European evaluation Network for rural Development on Capturing Impacts of Leader and of measures to improve Quality of Life in rural areas.

contributed to improve the existing ecosystem services and environmental amenities of the territory?" and 2) "To what extent have the QoL measures and Leader contributed to improve the public perception (by inhabitants and by visitors/guests) about environmental amenities and ecosystem services?"

- *Impact indicators suggested by the framework of reference:* 1) "Increased share of people actively using new opportunities created to experience, watch, make use etc. of environmental amenities;" and 2) "Increased satisfaction of rural population with environmental situation, environmental amenities and ecosystem services."

C. Rural economy impacts on quality of Life

- *The related CMEF common evaluation question:* "To what extent has the support contributed to improving the Quality of Life in rural areas?"
- *The assessment criterion proposed by the framework of reference:* "Valorisation of socio-economic performance"
- *Specific evaluation questions proposed by the framework of reference:* 1) "To what extent have the new value added been produced from resources and potentials specific to the area?" and 2) "To what extent have businesses been developed / adapted to increase the economic resilience of rural households?"
- *Impact indicators suggested by the framework of reference:* 1) "Number of businesses / jobs created through valorisation of specific resources." and 2) "Contribution of sectors to regional VA", and 3) "No of businesses/jobs created through linking sectors and actors"

D. Governance impacts on Quality of Life

- *The related CMEF common evaluation question:* "To what extent has the Leader approach contributed to improving governance in rural areas?"
- *The assessment criterion proposed by the framework of reference:* "Level of decentralisation"
- *Specific evaluation questions proposed by the framework of reference:* 1) "To what extent have the QoL measures and Leader contributed to decentralisation?" and 2) "What were the direct and indirect benefits of QoL measures and Leader interacting beyond borders (intra- and inter-regional)?"
- *Impact indicators suggested by the framework of reference:* 1) "New initiatives or innovations initiated under Axes 3 and 4 that have directly inspired or contributed to new or improved regional or county level approaches", 2) "Change in decision-making that resulted in more equitable representation at county or regional levels of non-public development stakeholders", 3) "Appreciation of how far border-crossing

activities have evolved from ad-hoc to regular features" and 4) "Lessons learned and changes driven by these exchanges/collaborations"

3. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Based on the presented Working Paper "Capturing impacts of Leader and of measures to improve Quality of life in rural areas", the following conclusive remarks can be drawn:

- In spite of the increased effort to broaden rural policy interventions within the EU, targeting Quality of Life and endogenous rural development via Leader Axis, the measuring impacts of measures connected to above mentioned areas has presented enduring challenges to evaluators throughout the previous three generations of the programme.
- Therefore it is vital to suggest a common approach and evaluation framework (framework of reference) to assist evaluators to bridge the existing methodological gap in assessing the impact of QoL and Leader measures
- The starting point of this common approach is represented by identified concepts and implications of Quality of Life and the Leader interventions within the scope of wider objectives assigned to axes 3 and 4, which are linked to four impact categories/dimensions: **socio-cultural and services dimension, the environmental dimension, the economic dimension and the governance** creating the base of the above mentioned framework of reference.
- The suggested framework is based on a 3 steps approach: **Step 1** represents the monitoring information provided by the CMEF indicators as the basic source for the **framework of reference**, **Step 2** contains a series of **group meetings (round tables)** with a selected panel of stakeholders at programme level as the source of complementary qualitative information, **Step 3** focuses on **Judgement and validation**, when participants of group meetings provide their judgement for each impact criterion. In order to facilitate this method, the use a multi-criteria ranking tool is suggested.

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Internet-links

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- <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rur/leaderplus>
- <http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/eval/network>
- http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rurdev/index_en.htm
- <http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/evaluation>